

**REMARKS BY DEPUTY SECRETARY CHUCK CONNER
FNS NATIONAL NUTRITION EDUCATION CONFERENCE II
ARLINGTON, VA – SEPTEMBER 12, 2005**

Eric Bost, thank you very much.

Secretary Johanns specifically asked me to do several things here today. First is to recognize the work of Eric Bost ... his outstanding leadership and dedication ... on behalf of the health and well-being of millions of Americans.

Eric is not only doing a tremendous job. With your help, he's doing some of the most important work in this nation ... helping those with limited resources to achieve healthier lifestyles.

Eric, thank you very much.

And special thanks to everyone on the FNS staff who worked hard to plan this conference and bring us all together. Well done.

I want to welcome all of you to the Washington area and this second Nutrition Education Conference.

The fact that we again have about 900 strong is a ringing endorsement of the success of the 2003 meeting.

And this turnout speaks volumes about the motivation in this room.

We're here because we share more than the same commitment and goals.

We share the need to “touch base” with each other. We need to strengthen the collaboration that moves these programs to the states and into the hands of those who achieve so much for so many.

The 2003 meeting was truly historic. It was the first time that we brought everyone together.

And the interest then, as now, was tremendous.

Nutrition educators, managers, and others working in all of the Federal nutrition assistance programs from all across the country, and at all levels of government, came together to share experiences and lay out plans.

Now we're here to build on that partnership and keep the momentum going.

I have some direct results from the 2003 meeting that I'll share with you today.

But before I do, I want to express my deep concern -- and that of Secretary Johanns -- for FNS employees and our cooperators at the state and local level, and all our citizens, affected by the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

I ask you to take back home our appreciation to everyone on the FNS team and our partners who couldn't be here today because they're working tirelessly to get food into the hands of hurricane victims.

Immediate human need is USDA's first priority and you are at the heart of that effort.

My thanks to those from the Dallas regional office who drove to Baton Rouge in the early days of the crisis.

Our Atlanta and Dallas regional offices have worked around the clock from the start. And now, as evacuees move farther around the country, all FNS regions -- as well as headquarters -- are doing a tremendous job for their fellow Americans.

To prepare for the storm, USDA had stored food in warehouses in Louisiana and Texas. This pro-action made supplies readily available to help the stricken areas.

Since then, we've delivered more than 14 million pounds of food and baby food and formula products.

The Secretary has liberalized the food stamp program to speed benefits to people displaced from their communities.

He's authorized states to pre-load electronic benefit cards with \$50 in assistance.

We've encouraged states to take advantage of this offer as another way to assist people moving from shelters to temporary housing so they can buy food immediately.

To date, USDA has earmarked \$50 million for emergency food assistance for survivors.

We're increasing assistance available to those already receiving food stamp benefits ...

Providing food stamps to people who have not been under the program before...

And making sure that displaced students are receiving free school lunches.

This is critical, life-saving work, and the nation sees and appreciates your tremendous efforts.

But you and I know that the core of what you're doing for the hurricane survivors is what you do, every single day, across this country.

You're there – in crisis and routine -- to see that those in need receive food and nutrition, with dignity and respect.

RESULTS AND CHALLENGES

At the first conference two years ago, our goal was to find ways to strengthen our cooperation and maximize effectiveness.

This afternoon, I'd like to give you a quick overview of the progress that's been made.

When President Bush launched the Healthier US Initiative in 2002, it was more than an outline of the staggering costs of poor diet and physical inactivity.

Those costs ... in health ... are obesity and a range of illness from heart disease to diabetes. In dollars ... more than \$120 billion each year.

The President's Initiative challenged us to see the whole problem and do something about it. It challenged us to bring all resources – at all levels – to work as partners to improve America's fitness and health.

To put this issue in the spotlight, USDA's 2004 Outlook Forum – for the first time ever – explored the connection between diet and health.

USDA felt that the barrage of media attention and information surrounding this subject ... conflicting diet and weight loss plans ... along with implications for childhood nutrition, exercise, and health costs had served to confuse the issue and the public.

USDA speakers looked at the federal role in nutrition and educating America about healthy eating and the importance of balanced diets.

Studies show that most people understand the health risks of poor diet and lack of exercise. But most Americans don't act on this information and few change their lifestyles.

There's a tough job to be done: to communicate nutrition science in ways that empower the public ... that give them the skills and motivation to take action.

I'm pleased to report that Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services has made progress in this area. We're working with partners on a number of projects that will help move Americans toward a healthier lifestyle.

We're also recognizing schools meeting the Healthier US School Challenge. They're changing their nutrition environments by offering students more nutritious, healthier choices.

All of these changes require solid, science-based information.

Earlier this year, USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services issued the *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

For more than a century, USDA has provided nutrition guidance that's constantly evolving with the nation's needs and the growing science behind diet and lifestyle.

The Dietary Guidelines will help Americans live longer, healthier ... if they put its recommendations into practice.

To give them the tools to personalize their approach to healthier choices, we also unveiled MyPyramid this year.

This guidance system recognizes that one-size-fits-all hasn't worked. The online tools provided by MyPyramid.gov are among our many efforts to move Americans to healthier lifestyles.

And we're updating the WIC food package, the school meal patterns and the Thrifty Food Plan to comply with the new dietary guidance.

Two years ago, at the first Nutrition Education Conference, FNS convened state networking sessions that led to a new partnership – State Nutrition Action Plans.

These are a terrific opportunity to connect our nutrition education and promotion efforts and reach more people in the process.

Thanks to all of you, to state and local leaders, most states and territories have now developed these Plans and are putting them into action.

This Administration appreciates your enthusiasm for this kind of change. We appreciate your willingness to explore new connections that cut across programs and jurisdictions.

This is one example of a network that makes better use of our separate strengths. It sharpens our goals, maximizes our effectiveness, and helps us do a better job for the people we serve.

We need all of you as partners to make these efforts truly successful.

We need the power of each and every community. That's why we support handing responsibility for developing wellness policies to local districts, starting with the 2006-2007 school year.

Communities can best address the needs of their nutrition program participants and the general public. They can support the positive eating and health behaviors that work for them at the local level in ways that we cannot.

This is the philosophy of collaboration that's at the heart of President Bush's vision for a healthier nation that connects people with the nutrition assistance they need.

That's why the President's budget for 2005 supports our nutrition and health message with about \$623 million for nutrition education as part of the WIC, Child Nutrition and Food Stamp programs.

In terms of policy, USDA is looking ahead to the 2007 Farm Bill with forums across the country that are giving the citizens we serve a voice in the development of the new bill.

Under Secretary Bost will be hosting a series of Nutrition Forums, starting September 29th and 30th in New York City and Cheyenne, Wyoming.

These "specialty" sessions will focus largely – but not exclusively – on food and nutrition issues. I urge you to submit comments via USDA's Farm Bill Forums website.

With a number of FNS programs up for reauthorization under the 2007 Farm Bill, this Administration remains committed to ensuring that every eligible person has access to federal nutrition assistance programs.

We are committed to building on and improving these programs. They are the nutritional foundation for so many working Americans and their families.

Perhaps never before has the absolute importance of that foundation been so clear.

Perhaps never before has your work – your knowledge and sensitivity – been called on to do so much for so many.

At this unparalleled time of natural disaster, we, as a nation, are committed to meeting the most basic, urgent needs of our citizens.

The American people have seen the face of hunger – of the need for basic nutritional assistance -- in a large swath of the South.

I believe I can speak for them in saying thank you for your partnership, your compassion, and for all you do every day – but especially at this moment – for your fellow Americans. Thank you.